



Live Wires Associates

Information Sheet No 2

Parishes Great and Small

There is no one job description or way of seeing a vicar. Nor is there one way of understanding the life and dynamics of a congregation. Size and situation are important. Throughout my ministry as a trainer I have developed an idea which was put forward by Roy Oswald of the Alban Institute in the United States. (1) With colleagues in the U.K. and in mainland Europe I have tried to add to it and adapt it for situations other than those of the congregations of the United States. (2)

Family, Pastoral, Programme and Corporate sized congregations

Basing his analysis on previous work done by Arlin Rothauge, Oswald sets out four basic congregational sizes. Each presents specific sets of behaviour by its members and each requires different methods of working from its ministers. None are absolutely watertight. Some appear to function well even though they are in the wrong category, but life is full of exceptions. I have added a fifth category to take into account the demands made on clergy with more than one parish and for congregations who share one minister. We also need to note, and take into account, the relatively new phenomenon of 'Church planting' from relatively large congregations.

The Small or 'Family' size congregation

All too easily small congregations are seen as problems, ripe for closure or joining with neighbouring parishes, as prey to ideas about teams or groups. Clergy can feel undervalued when offered 'charge' of small congregations. They can be regarded, quite wrongly, as places for the sick, for pre-retirement placements or to be shared with an appointment to a specialist ministry post.

What has hardly ever been attempted is an analysis of the life and needs of clergy and people in the small congregation of 40 people or less. Most of us will recognise some distinctive behavioural characteristics from congregations we have known. My wife and I often remark how there are the same people in our various congregations, they just have different names! Roy Oswald calls this a Family-sized church where there are definite and identifiable characteristics.

The Family Church with Patriarchs and Matriarchs

This congregation functions like a family and has appropriate parental figures. These characters defend and control the life of the congregation. They feel a responsibility for its survival and the need to preserve and keep traditions which generations of previous patriarchs and matriarchs have thought important.

Defence and survival

Attitudes which are stated as necessary to keep the church open are the very ones which may be contributing to its downfall. So much hard work is being put in by so few that it is difficult for newcomers to get in at all. The key role of the patriarch or matriarch is to see that clergy do not take the surviving congregation off in new directions!

The need for traditional care

These congregations need and expect traditional pastoral care. The minister has to visit all those in the congregation on a regular basis and be available at all times for crises and demands of any kind.

Clergy succeed when they consult

Confrontation will lead to disaster. The only way for a minister to make any progress is to take the needs of the congregation seriously and to listen to what is being said. However difficult it may seem befriending the key people is the only way forward.

Clergy are not taken seriously

Deeply-rooted patriarchal and matriarchal congregations survive by not taking their clergy seriously. 'He or she will only be here for a few years. We can ride their enthusiasms and then go back to what we know when they move on.'

Clergy do not stay

Small congregations are seen as short-stay first appointments or as a last resting place before retirement. Such placement policies by denominations reinforce what these congregations already know - that they are not being taken seriously. Curates are not trained to handle small congregations. They come from 'successful', often suburban, training parishes. They find it hard to work and to stay with the small congregation because their criteria for what works well lie elsewhere.

The Pastoral size Congregation

Very many people see the congregation with 40 to 130 members as the ideal kind of church. It is the one which is big enough to get things done but small enough for people to know one-another by their first names. It is the congregation which will grow most easily by careful attention from the minister who, if they have a mind to, can get around and visit everyone - occasionally! This is the congregation in which training courses can work and where there are just enough people to be able to keep the rotas going. There is enough pledged income to be able to budget and to pay the bills. It is the size looked upon favourably by most denominations as 'successful'. However, all concerned are perplexed that this congregation finds it difficult to grow any larger. The benefits of this size of congregation and the demands made upon all concerned go a long way to explain the dilemma.

The minister relates to everyone

Clergy are usually at the centre of a pastoral church. There are so many parental figures around that they want a central person to be the focus for them.

Personal expectations are high

Everyone has an expectation that they will have some kind of personal relationship with the minister. Visiting is expected. Lay people are encouraged to share in the visiting but the 'real' visit is from the vicar. He or she will be expected to be present at every function, or at least to pay a visit.

Growth depends on the minister's popularity

Within a narrow band, compared with the size of the parish, the congregation will add 20-30 people, or lose them depending on the popularity of the minister. What happens then is up to the skills and resourcefulness of minister and people.

Oppressive demands are felt

As a congregation grows to 100+ the personal demands on the minister become enormous. No one person can cope with the individual expectations of so many people. Delegate or die.

The person at the centre

It is the minister who is the focus of the congregational community. He or she is seen as primarily responsible for recruitment, whether or not this is true. Newcomers can expect to get a personal visit from the minister who is also the principal shepherd of newcomers into the congregation by making invitations and ensuring that they are put on rotas. Present job-holders might move aside if the minister asks.

Hard on the minister's family

The minister's family often say that they feel they are in a sharing agreement with the rest of the congregation. The strains on a marriage are enormous. Great care has to be taken to give time to the family and to get time off together.

Size is a block to growth

The greatest problem in congregations of this size is to be able to overcome their minister-focused orientation. Delegation and genuine shared ministries are a must. Lay teams of visitors are essential. Lay leaders need to be identified and trained. A new relationship has to be negotiated with the minister - preferable before heart attack, breakdown or divorce.

The cluster of congregations

Somewhere between the Family and the Pastoral congregation levels each relating to one minister is another common situation. This is where several parishes and congregations are brought together with one minister. Much learning needs to be done about these situations. There have now been some interesting pieces of work done on rural clusters in follow-up work to the Church of England report ***Faith in the Countryside***. There is a strong national network exploring ***Local Ministry***. More formally this situation applies to Teams and groups, but here more clergy are involved. Several years of work with ministers and people in these clusters has led to the production of this check-list of essentials to be taken into account.

- * Always get help with administration. One secretary for all the congregations can save much frustration. A computer helps enormously with data, lists and in producing the group newsletter.
- * Clarify the expectations of the congregations. Do they realise the minister is not theirs exclusively? How much time per week can be given to each congregation?
- * Delegate all local responsibilities.
- * Agree how expenses will be shared.
- * Streamline the pattern of meetings. Avoid duplication wherever possible. Encourage gradual co-operation.
- * Establish a regular pattern of services in a month. Services which are at the same time every Sunday help people to get into a routine and to remember when to come.
- * Decide on a regular day of the week to visit in each community. This also avoids jealousy about where the minister spends time.
- * Let everyone know who the local person is for contacts about weddings, baptisms and funeral details.
- * Make full use of meeting rooms for local events in each community. Encourage people to travel to support each others special events.
- * Make great use of the fifth Sunday in a month for times of united worship.
- * Ensure everyone in each community knows the vicarage, manse, presbytery is equally theirs. Make it clear how the minister and family want to use it as a public place, if at all.
- * It is vital that the minister knows who is related to who in the different communities.
- * Get to know the history of co-operation or rivalry between the different communities.

Understand where are the joint meeting places for communities are - schools, Guides and Scouts, Women's Institutes, Rotary, etc. Do not clash or duplicate.

The 'programme' congregation

Much has been written, almost too much, about the ceiling of 150 or so people which very many congregations with one minister appear to reach. I think that there is a real, and very understandable, sense in which the human-sized congregation or group of people does not want to grow so large that people do not know each other by their Christian names. In a later section I shall suggest that one of the reasons for the appropriateness of church planting is so that congregations can be kept to this human size.

The so-called programme congregation is one which has managed to break through the numbers ceiling and establish an acceptable new structure. The fundamentally different characteristic of this congregation is that there has been acceptance gained for high quality personal contact with the minister to be supplemented by other methods of pastoral care. Lay visitors, support and discussion groups and a devolved, lay-led, management structure take the place of the omni-competent minister. A Programme congregation will have many of these characteristics.

- Several staff members, ordained and lay.
- A well developed lay leadership who can work well with the staff team. Concepts of what 'collaborative ministry' is have been explored.
- The principal minister is still central but the role and expectations have been changed. Sometimes a present minister can manage the change as growth takes place. Often illness or strain forces it. A new minister can negotiate and be happier with a different style.
- Home groups and youth groups are seen to be important and are well organised.
- Good administration takes on a more publicly acknowledged role. The need for systems to assist recruiting, planning, co-ordinating, training, co-ordinating and evaluating become obvious.
- One of the principal roles of the minister is to be the pastor to the lay leaders and to help groups arrive at a consensus around a shared vision.
- 'Unless clergy can learn to derive satisfaction from the work of pastoral administration, they should think twice about accepting the call to such a parish.'
(Roy Oswald)

The 'corporate' congregation

Large, famous, eclectic, congregations are corporate churches. People attend for a whole range of different reasons from those which attract others to the small, local congregation. Here preaching and the ecclesiastical tradition are important. Such a church may function as a symbol of a particular kind of worship for many others. Congregation members would not expect the principal minister to visit them. Associate ministers and a staff team will have responsibility for all to the day-to-day running of the church. Lay leaders and salaried professionals will be responsible for specialised areas of work such as music, pastoral counselling and publishing.

The corporate congregation will have many of these features:

- A high priority will be placed on the quality of the special kind of worship which is being offered.
- Preaching will be very important. Sermons are likely to be recorded and sold.

- The musical tradition will be of a very high quality.
- The staff team spend significant time on sermons and the preparation of worship.
- The senior minister is a symbol of unity and stability.
- The staff team will be collegial but diverse in skills.
- The leadership team will generate energy and momentum for the congregation.
- A very dispersed congregation will be supported by a sophisticated computerised system and a range of new member and renewal programmes.
- The methods of contacting, and following-up, newcomers will be very sophisticated.
- This church is a large scale financial operation which feeds and supports a range of associated networks doing similar work.

The right size at the right stage

The secret of understanding this analysis of the different size of congregations comes with matching yourself to the appropriate one at the right stage in your ministry. Different personality types of priest also warm to different sizes of congregation.

I have frequently complained of the inappropriateness of training curates in large suburban congregations and then giving them one or two small congregations as a first job. Few of the patriarchal and matriarchal traits experienced in the small congregation are experienced in the suburban one of 100 or more people. There needs to be specific training for work in a small congregation, just as there does with moves from urban to rural situations and vice versa.

Clergy often begin with relatively small congregations and 'graduate' to larger ones. There are many clergy who will find the congregation of 30 or less completely stifling, which others prefer the intimacy of small numbers. There are clergy who want to work with colleagues and others who find this difficult. Other clergy can co-operate with ecumenical colleagues while others find the spread of their own denomination difficult enough!

Knowing what is likely to be going on within the life of a congregation can help in the choice of where which clergy and teams are right for which situations. Such an analysis is essential in the opportunities and tensions within congregations of different sizes. In one way no two parishes are the same. In another way all parishes have characteristics and similarities which need to be taken seriously and explored.

- (1) *How to minister effectively in Family, Pastoral, Programme and Corporate sized Churches*, Roy M. Oswald. Alban Institute *Action Information* March/April 1991.
- (2) These situations are set out more fully in *What they don't teach you at theological college*, Malcolm Grundy, Canterbury Press, 2003

Malcolm Grundy is an Associate of Live-Wires Consultancy and Training www.live-wires.org